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HAMAS REVIEWING ISRAELI OFFER FOR CEASEFIRE AS ATTACK LOOMS

Hamas did not reveal the Israeli proposal but it was in response to its offer two weeks ago. Egypt is trying to find a solution to the war

EGYPT PLAYING PEACEMAKER ON GAZA

Talks are on over a six-week ceasefire and the release of 40 civilian and sick hostages in exchange for freeing hundreds of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails. Hamas' statement came hours after an Egyptian delegation in Israel discussed a 'new vision' for prolonged truce in Gaza. Whether Israel's proposal to Hamas on truce was tied to the Egyptian visit was not clear

AIRSTRIKE KILLS FOUR CHILDREN IN RAFAH

- An Israeli airstrike on Saturday morning hit a house in Rafah killing six persons, including four children. In another airstrike, five persons were killed in the Nuseirat refugee camp in central Gaza overnight
- *BBC* reported that Britain is considering deploying troops to ferry aid from a new port being built by the US in Gaza. No decision has been taken yet | P11

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U.N. STAFFERS IN GAZA ARE BEING PROBED FOR THEIR ROLE IN HAMAS' OCT 7 ATTACK

CHENNAI • MADURAI • VIJAYAWADA • BENGALURU • KOCHI • HYDERABAD • VISAKHAPATNAM • COIMBATORE • KOZHIKODE • THIRUVANANTHAPURAM • BELAGAVI • BHUBANESWAR • SHIVAMOGGA • MANGALURU • TIRUPATI • TIRUCHY • TIRUNELVELI • SAMBALPUR • HUBBALLI • DHARMAPURI • KOTTAYAM • KANNUR • VILLUPURAM • KOLLAM • TADEPALLIGUDEM • NAGAPATTINAM • THRISSUR • KALABURAGI

1. A view of the forest fire in Uttarakhand. 2. An IAF helicopter fills water from the Bhimtal lake in Nainital district to douse the fire | EXPRESS

Centre clears ₹3,498 cr, 20% of drought relief sought by state

K'taka had sent proposal for ₹18,171 cr, to continue legal battle in SC for balance amount

DEVARAJ B HIREHALLI @ Bengaluru

THE Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) on Friday sanctioned Rs 3,498 crore to Karnataka under National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF) as relief for the 2023 drought (kharif) against the state's request for Rs 18,171 crore.

Reacting to this, Revenue Minister Krishna Byre Gowda alleged that the Centre continued todo injustice to the state by releasing only 19.25% of the state's claim. "It is because of our legal battle that we managed to get at least this much. If we had not approached the SC, the Centre would not have released even that. The state is facing one of the worst droughts with 223 of the 240 taluks declared drought-hit. But it got less than 20% of the fund sought," he said.

SIDDU PLAYS CENTRE

CM Siddaramaiah has expressed dissatisfaction over the quantum of drought relief announced by the Centre. He said his government had sought Rs 18,172 crore as drought relief. But the Centre has sanctioned only Rs 3,464 crore, which is not even a quarter of the state's request.

K'TAKA BJP THANKS PM

Karnataka BJP leaders have hit out at Congress government for its decision to stage a protest on Sunday and thanked PM Modi for providing funds. BJP leader BY Vijayendra said despite the MCC in place, the Modi government took special permission from the EC to provide assistance.

The ruling Congress in Karnataka and the opposition BJP have made this a major issue in the campaign for Lok Sabha elections. Getting even 19.25% of the total amount requested as drought relief has become a poll plank, while stressing on efforts to get the balance amount at the earliest.

Byre Gowda said the drought relief money will be released directly to the bank accounts of farmers in the next one week as the fund is transferred to the state's account from the Centre. "There is no mention of arrears in the Centre's notification. Thus, the state government's legal battle will continue until the due amount (remaining of the total Rs 18,171 crore requested) is received from the Centre," he said.

He said the Centre is likely to inform the court on Monday about its decision, after discussing with its counsels and CM Siddaramaiah on how to get the balance amount. He said the state government had submitted a memorandum to the Centre for assistance on September 22, 2023, after which a central team toured 13 Karnataka districts between April 4 and 9 and submitted a report to the Union Ministry of Agriculture and Home Affairs within a week. P4

U'KHAND BURNS, AIR FORCE STEPS IN

NARENDRA SETHI @ Dehradun

WITH forest fires engulfing the Nanda range in Nainital district of Uttarakhand, the Centre deployed a Air Force helicopter on Saturday to control the blaze. Parallelly, the state government requested the assistance of the Army.

The IAF's Mi-17 helicopter did 13 sorties, drawing water from the Naini and Bhimtal lakes in a Bambi bucket and emptying it over the flames in the Pines, Bhumiadhar, Jyolikot, Narayan Nagar, Bhawali, Ramgarh and Mukteshwar areas. Fire-fighting operations are expected to continue on Sunday as well.

Nainital Sub-Divisional Magistrate Pramod Kumar said, "The wildfire is spreading uncontrollably from the pine forests to the Lariyakanta forests. Efforts are on with the assistance of an IAF helicopter to extinguish it."

An ITI building was partially burnt in the massive fire in the pine forest near Nainital. The fire also reached dangerously close to the High Court Colony in Nainital but hasn't caused any damage so far. The forest of Ladiyakanta in Nainital was also in flames. The fire brigade barely managed to control it.

Dense smoke enveloped the road from Nainital to Bhawali, disrupting movement of vehicles for hours.

Forest department sources said wildfires are spreading due to limited rainfall.

Nishant Verma, nodal officer of Uttarakhand's forest department for forest fires, said, "As of April 25, the forest department has recorded 146 cases of man-made fires. Of these, 17 individuals have been identified. As for 129 other cases, the perpetrators are unknown."

CM Pushkar Singh Dhami said all efforts are being made to control the fires.

RED AT SEA

Houthis attack oil ship bound for India

YESHI SELI @ New Delhi

YEMEN-based Houthi rebels on early Saturday fired ballistic missiles on an oil tanker travelling through the Red Sea heading towards India from Russia. The United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations said the Panama-flagged, Seychelles-registered Andromeda Star was attacked twice.

The crew is safe and the vessel is en route to its destination Vadinar port in Gujarat. The incident occurred 14 nautical miles off Al Mukha, Yemen. Houthi spokesman Brig. Gen. Yahya Saree in a pre-recorded statement claimed responsibility for the attack.

The oil tanker originated from Primorsk, Russia.

"The first was an explosion close to the vessel and the second consisted of two missile attacks, which damaged the vessel," according to UKMTO (United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations).

The US military's Central Command said there was a 'minor damage' to the oil tanker. Last year, Houthis said they will continue to target Israel-bound vessels till it stops its assault on Gaza. Since November, they have launched more than 50 attacks on the ships passing through Red Sea, seized one vessel and sank another one.

In recent times there was a lull in the Houthis attacks on ships. But from Wednesday the attacks restarted. Houthis' successful attacks have been on vessels heading to of other nations than Israel.

EXPRESS READ

Railways plans to roll out Vande Metro

New Delhi: After the success of semi-high speed Vande Bharat trains, the Railways is planning to launch the country's first Vande Metro. Preparations are on to start its trial run from July so that its services can be offered to people soon, an official said.

In just 37km, mood of K'taka voters changes

BOSKY KHANNA @ Bengaluru

THE distance between the constituencies that recorded the highest and lowest voter turnout in Phase-2 LS elections in Karnataka that went to polls on April 26 is just 37 km.

The highest voter turnout in Karnataka was 86.44% recorded at Hoskote in Chikkaballapura LS constituency, while the lowest was seen at Bommanahalli in Bangalore South LS constituency with 47.55%.

The Election Commission of India on Saturday released the final voting percentage of 14 constituencies in south and coastal Karnataka with assembly segment-wise turnout break-up.

Karnataka recorded the final voter turnout of 69.56%. Till 9.45 pm on April 26, according to the office of the Chief Electoral Officer, it was 69.23%. The voter turn out in Karnataka has been higher than the national average of 67.40%.

Psephologists and election officials said the apathy among urban voters, especially in Bengaluru, continues to be the prime reason for poor turnout. An election official said, "We had not expected a drastic rise in voting percentage in Bengaluru. It has always been poor in the state." P6

REPOLLING IN MM HILLS BOOTH ON MONDAY

1. The EC ordered repolling at Indiganatha village in MM Hills even as people fled the village fearing police action for Friday's violence
2. It will be held at the government lower primary school on Monday between 7am and 6pm
3. The villagers had set fire to EVMs and furniture inside the booth and attacked election officials for "forcing" them to vote.

Amid veteran vs fresher fight, all eyes on seer swing bowling

PRAMODKUMAR VAIDYA @ Hubballi

THOUGH a prominent pontiff bowed out of the contest after promising a scintillating match, the Lok Sabha election scene in Dharwad continues to be as intense and exciting.

Influential Lingayat pontiff Dingaleshwar Swamiji had spiced up the polls by announcing his candidature but later opted out. While making his pitch, the Swamiji had sharply attacked sitting MP and Union minister Pralhad Joshi (61), accusing him of dishonouring the Lingayats and victimising its leaders.

With the BJP repeating Joshi from Dharwad, the Congress hopes the Swamiji could be a force multiplier against him.

SHOWTIME FOR GLADIATORS

At stake in Dharwad is the BJP's prestige as it has held this Lingayat majority constituency for seven consecutive terms. The Congress is trying its best to knock out Joshi. Their straight fight is being closely watched because of Joshi's perceived proximity to the BJP brass.

Instead of fielding a Lingayat against Joshi, the Congress gave the ticket to an AHINDA (a Kannada acronym for minorities, backward classes and Dalits coined by Karnataka's first backward class leader Devraj Urs), which has stood firmly behind Chief Minister Siddaramaiah. The party's nominee, Vinod Asuti (34), who belongs to the Kuruba community and is a debutant in the LS poll.

The Congress is playing the youth card against veteran Joshi. Also, district minister Santosh Lad has been campaigning vigorously for Asuti. For his part, Joshi is emphasising on the track record of the NDA government in ushering in development and his performance as a parliamentarian in the last two decades.

As the constituency has eluded the Congress since 1996, its campaign is focused on the wider reach of the five guarantees implemented by the Siddaramaiah government and the other guarantees in the party's manifesto. That apart, the party has been stitching alliances with various social and caste groups to further strengthen its AHINDA plank.

The Congress is missing the services of its strong Lingayat leader Vinay Kulkarni, who was pitted against Joshi in the last two polls. But the Supreme Court barred his entry into the district while granting him bail, since he is an accused in the murder of BJP member Yogishgouda Goudar.

Performance wise, Joshi has done well. But the Congress is aggressively playing the Lingayat card to change the narrative. The BJP enjoys enough support among the Lingayats, but its victory would depend on how things pan out on the polling day.

The shocking murder of Neha Hiremath, the daughter of a Congress corporator is a red hot poll issue. By politicising it as 'love jihad', the BJP is trying to consolidate the Hindu votes. Dharwad goes to polls on May 7 when voters will have to choose between a veteran and a fresher.

City records 38°C, highest this year

BOSKY KHANNA @ Bengaluru

BENGALURU recorded the highest temperature of 38 degrees Celsius, so far this year, on Saturday. The temperatures are on the rise not just in Bengaluru but also in other districts of the state.

According to the India Meteorological Department (IMD), Raichur recorded the highest temperature of 42 degrees Celsius on Saturday.

Bagalkot recorded 41.7 degrees Celsius, Koppal 41.5 and Chikkanahalli 41.4.

The highest temperature Bengaluru recorded was 39.2 degrees Celsius on April 25, 2016.

The temperature recorded on Saturday is the second highest for April, so far. It is also the first time that the city recorded not even 1mm rain for April.

These apart, the IMD has issued a heat wave alert till May 5 for most parts of the state. It has also issued an alert that the maximum temperatures will rise by 2 to 3 degrees Celsius across the state in the next five days. Hot and humid weather conditions will prevail over Bengaluru, Dakshina Kannada, Udupi and Uttara Kannada districts for the next three days. P5

VANUATU DARE TO DREAM

Fantasy cricket: From picking fruits & berries to beating full-member team

KALYANI MANGALE @ Chennai

THE moment Maiyllise Carlot hit the winning runs against Zimbabwe at the Zayed Cricket Stadium in Abu Dhabi, Tim Cutler, the CEO of Cricket Vanuatu, a self-declared bad watcher of the game, felt like he was living in a world of fantasy. After all, the lowest-ranked team amongst those gathered for the Global Qualifiers for the ICC Women's T20 World Cup, had just beaten the full-member nation, on their debut, a week after they successfully conducted a crowd-funding exercise for their playing kits.

What makes their story even more fascinating is that if they were not playing cricket, most of the players would have been picking fruits and berries away in Australia, Vanuatu's neighbouring nation. The players live there nine out of 12 months to earn money, practice after their daily chores and kept the love for the sport burning.

On Thursday, along with Cutler, Vanuatu had one of their biggest supporters in the stands too. Rodney Prestia, CEO of I Comply Horticultural Compliance And Labour Management

— the company that has hired eight players from the squad to work in Australia. The players are currently on leave from their seasonal jobs. Some of them flew directly from Australia and many will go back to their jobs.

"Basically everyone who shone yesterday, works for us," Prestia, who surprised the squad by flying to Abu Dhabi, told this daily. Nasimana Navaika, who took the four wickets, captain Selina Solman, Rachel Andrew, who took two wickets, Vicky Mansale, opening batter, Valenta Langiatu and others, eight of the playing 11 all work for the company. "Australia have a partnership with Vanuatu called a Seasonal Work Program, where workers can go to Australia for seasonal work. They are working in a town called Stanthorpe, three hours from Brisbane. The players have been picking tomatoes, capsicums and strawberries," he said. After work at 4pm, players start their practice on a ground close to their accommodation. Prestia gave credit to the former Vanuatu Prime Minister Ishmael Kalsakau for the programme. "The then PM was a little bit critical for taking all the good sportspersons out of Vanuatu. The government said, we are trying hard to develop players but we lose them to Australia to fruit picking because we can't compete with the salaries on offer. He said we have to try and find a way we can do both. So we started this program with beach volleyball first and then cricket." P13